



# Journal of International Relations and Peace (JIRP)

ISSN: 3087-0098 (ONLINE)

**VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1 (2026)**



PUBLISHED BY  
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

## Cultural Symbologies in Traditional Dispute Settlement of Ikwerre and Etche Cultures: A Semiotic Analysis

OKEH, Azubuike<sup>1\*</sup>, EZE George Ogazi Mani<sup>2</sup>, ONYESO Prince Ikeokwu Nwaokugha<sup>1</sup>

### Article Information

**Received:** December 01, 2025

**Accepted:** March 05, 2026

**Published:** April 15, 2026

### Keywords

*Semiotics, Cultural Symbologies, Ikwerre, Etche, Traditional Dispute Settlement*

### ABSTRACT

This paper discussed the semiotics of the cultural symbologies in the traditional dispute settlement mechanisms adopted within the Ikwerre and Etche cultures in the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. By taking a Semiotic and Peace Building analytical framework the study interpreted the meaning embedded in symbols, rituals, gestures, locations and artifacts that are the communicative systems of both the ethnic groups. These symbolic practices based on deep indigenous epistemologies are explored as instruments of social regulation, justice and communal harmony. The research underscored the ways in which material and performative symbols such as the use of kola nuts, palm fronds, ancestral shrines, oath taking, live trees and libation, are used as cultural signifiers and mediating tools in conflict resolution. The study, in a comparative perspective, highlighted the semiotic convergence and divergence as the basis of Ikwerre and Etche traditions, showing that the strategies of justice and reconciliation as practiced in the cultures are rooted in common cultural codes. The research used qualitative approaches both in data collection and analysis. The analysis situated these practices within broader discourses of African jurisprudence and cultural sustainability and showed that indigenous semiotic systems are viable within modern peacebuilding and restorative justice frameworks. Ultimately, the paper argued that understanding cultural symbologies enhanced appreciation of local knowledge systems as viable complements to modern legal mechanisms in postcolonial African societies. It therefore recommended that custodians of Ikwerre and Etche cultures should continue to uphold the adoption of traditional methods in dispute settlement. It concluded that the conventional methods such as documentation of settlement terms should be used to solidify the usage of traditional methods.

### INTRODUCTION

Conflicts and misunderstandings have been a part of human existence from time immemorial. It is often believed that at the settlement of disputes, relationships become stronger, and harmony restored between feuding parties. In African societies, traditional forms of settling disputes have continued to gain recognition, prominence and acceptance. This is perhaps because of their ability to restore communal harmony, trust and rebuild failing relationships. In many cultural settings, using traditional means to settle disputes arising from land ownership, chieftaincy tussle, Robbery, marital misunderstandings among others has been found to prioritise reconciliation and cooperation over competition and punishment. The Ikwerre and Etche ethnic nationalities in Rivers State, Nigeria enjoy proximities in different areas of their cultural lives, the people believe that traditional dispute settlement forms promote social healing, commitment to loyalty, building of trust and reinforcement of communal values rather than focusing on blame and punitive consequences. In the two cultures, symbols, objects, practices and locations such as palm fronds (Òmu), traditional staff (Òwhor or Òfor), live trees (Ukpo), libations (Itu onu/ Iwu manyi), kola nuts(Aji or Oji), oaths (Odu-ishì or Idu-ishì), clay pot communion (Orikor or Nrikor), shrines (Ihnu Agbara or Ruhnu Renwu / Ihu Nmuo) among others are used for traditional dispute settlement.

According to Ngale (2024) traditional dispute settlement is important because it promotes community peace through culturally relevant methods, maintains social order, and offers a faster, more accessible and less costly alternatives to formal legal systems. These systems are often seen as more effective because they allow for direct participation, are based on community values and trust, and can achieve quicker and more satisfactory outcomes that help to prevent the escalation of conflicts and the creation of enemies.

Cornejo (2017) defined cultural symbology as the meanings ascribed to symbols and objects within a specific culture. This involves the identification, analysis and interpretation of symbols that show up in the form of objects, gestures, colors, or locations that carry specific, shared meanings and express a culture's beliefs and values.

### Statement of Problem

In human society, conflicts, disputes and misunderstanding arise from time to time. The inability of societies to evolve effective means of resolving conflicts can lead to perpetual chaos and underdevelopment.

In a study conducted by Tuso (2011), land, chieftaincy, personal relationship issues, family property, honour, murder or poisoning, and matrimonial fall-outs were reported as the major causes of disputes in African communities. The study further reported that to resolve

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Humanities, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE), Port Harcourt, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

\* Corresponding author's e-mail: [george.eze@iaue.edu.ng](mailto:george.eze@iaue.edu.ng)

such conflicts, symbols, objects and settlement patterns that uphold the principles of equity and justice as enshrined in African customs and traditions should be upheld.

In many cultural settings, the adoption of traditional methods to settle disputes has proven to be effective in enthrone peace, stability and development, therefore not to use them when disputes arise between community members or groups is capable of keeping a society in endless anarchy and lack of development. This is a consideration that necessitated this study.

**Going by the conversation above, this study sought to**

1. Find out how the Ikwerre and Etche Cultures in Rivers State, Nigeria have used cultural symbols, objects and patterns to settle disputes.
2. Determine the meanings that the Ikwerre and Etche traditions in Rivers State ascribe to symbols, objects and patterns used for dispute settlements.

**Accordingly the study asked the following questions:**

1. How do Ikwerre and Etche Cultures in Rivers State use cultural symbols, objects and patterns to settle disputes?
2. What meanings do Ikwerre and Etche traditions in Rivers State ascribe to symbols, objects and patterns used for dispute settlements?

**Theoretical Thrust**

The theoretical thrusts of this study are the Social Conflict, Peace Building and Semiotic Theories.

**Social Conflict theory:** The Social conflict theory as postulated by Karl Max sees society to be an ongoing competition between groups who struggle for limited resources such as power, money status among others, leading to inequality and conflict. It argues that social order is maintained by domination and power instead of consensus because powerful groups actively suppress others to keep their powers and advantage afloat.

**Peace Building Theory:** A brain child of John Paul Lederach, birthed in 1997. The peace building theory discusses sustainable reconciliation in divided societies and argues for a holistic, multi-layered approach to conflict resolution. The theory sees peace building as a process that is beyond mere traditional diplomacy but focuses on long-term social transformation.

**Semiotic Theory:** The Semiotic Theory according to Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce focuses on how signs and symbols create meaning within cultures and societies. The theory proposes that signs which include words, images, objects, and symbols, do not have inherent meanings, but are given meanings through social and cultural conventions.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Traditional Dispute Settlement in Pre-colonial Africa**

African societies have continued to have institutional mechanisms and cultural sources used to uphold the

values of peace, tolerance, solidarity and respect for one another even long before they were colonised.

Ademowo (2015), He asserted that such structures were responsible for education, peace, confidence-building, peacemaking, peace-building, conflict monitoring, conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict resolution among others in African communities. These mechanisms were effective in tackling and managing conflicts among dwellers in many African communities largely because they carried a reflection of the socio-political orientation of the African people.

Keyes (2012) stated that before the advent of colonialism, the traditional African system of government was open and inclusive, asserting that people could participate in the decision-making process. He maintained that while the West practiced majoritarian, or representative democracy Africans practiced participatory democracy, where decisions were taken by consensus at village meetings. This participatory democracy was variously called names in African Languages such as Asetena kese in Ashanti, Ama-ala in Igbo, Guurti in Somali, Ndaba in Zulu or Kgotla in Tswana.

Keyes further posited that indigenous institutions and traditional forms of community administration in many African communities became weakened and even destroyed with the advent of slave trade and colonisation. This is especially as the colonial masters introduced law courts, which came to pronounce judgments rather than resolve conflicts as practiced by Africans.

Lending a voice to the conversation, Dongen (2012, p.28) wrote that with the newly imposed court system of legal administration in African societies, the police took up cases that hitherto, were handled through traditional amicable settlements, with emphasis on reconciliation and the restoration of social harmony, instead of meting punishment of the conflicting parties. The traditional methods adopted by African communities for conflict prevention, management and resolution were largely effective and respected as decisions were absolutely binding on all parties. This was mainly because the identity of an individual is linked to that of his or her family and these families are formed by the acceptance of marriage alliances, so the importance of the family, traditional institutions, deities, sacred symbols among others in the conflict management process was hugely respected. African communities adopted and revered the principles of equity and justice in resolving conflicts as entrenched in their customs and traditions, the emphasis was not on punitive consequences.

**Symbols and Communication in Traditional Dispute Settlement**

The use symbols, objects, rituals among other traditional patterns to settle disputes in African communities has continued to gain recognition. Many stakeholders such as scholars and custodians of culture have held the opinion that these symbols and patterns act as means of communication, reinforce values, and enthrone

harmony because they instill fear of spiritual or ancestral repercussions.

Geertz (2003) writes that the efficacy of traditional forms of dispute resolution is rooted in the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the affected communities. He stated that in some societies, sharing of kola nuts or drink after a resolution symbolizes peace while shrines and oaths are used to settle intractable disputes. According to him, these methods can be very effective because they portray spiritual consequences.

Zartnan (2000), the book gets involved in the aspect of African traditional dispute settlement mechanisms, they said that the traditional African conflict resolution mechanisms can provide some clues as to methods of resolving the modern conflicts which resist modern approach. He claimed that traditional symbols, practices, places and objects have played a role in uniting the group, in the process of reconciliation, forgiveness and the peace and harmony of communities.

Holding the belief that there is no substitute for indigenous and homegrown approaches to African problems as it would seem that external interference in African problems is often ineffective or counter-productive; Aithey (2024, p. 108) had argued that Africa should stand by its own solutions to the African problems. His argument stresses African ownership, agency and self-determination, the development of solutions to problems which are customized to the continent's own unique contexts, and dependency on any foreign power. Hutson (2000) submitted that symbols and rituals are used to communicate diverse meanings in dispute resolution, and that symbols convey values, history, and the rules of society. Symbols are used to build consensus, reinforce settlements, achieve compliance and restore harmony among feuding parties.

Ngale (2024, p.401) corroborated the above line of thinking when he stated that after a dispute is settled, ritualistic sharing of items such as kola nuts or local gin, and libation can symbolise the restoration of peace and harmony. This sharing or communion and libation provoke the involvement of the gods and ancestors in the dispute settlement process. It also compels compliance with the terms of resolution because parties fear negative consequences arising from the wrath of the gods. In some cases or communities, palm wine or gin may be used for libations to the gods and ancestors to make binding statements that can reinforce the terms of reconciliation. Obodoegbulam and Amadi (2018) assert that in Ogba and Ikwerre communities in Rivers State, Nigeria, oath-taking at sacred locations is a powerful tool for settling disputes where parties refuse to admit guilt or accept simpler resolutions. They stated that traditional dispute settlements patterns adopt different symbols and natural objects such as palm fronds (òmu), kolanuts (aji or òji) as well as symbolic tools ritual staff (òwhor or òffòr), libations, shrines, clay pot communion (orikor or irikor) among others.

According to them, these objects are used in different

ways, from representing peace and marking boundaries to serving as tools for making final judgments and appeasement sacrifices.

Semiotics and Meanings in Traditional Dispute Settlement Signs, symbols, rituals, locations and other non-verbal and cultural elements are used in African communities to communicate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts. In discussing the role of semiotic signs in facilitating peace communication, Brigham (1994) wrote that semiotics are integral to society's peace systems because of its efficacy to bridge gaps in understanding, reinforce cultural values, and provide a framework for mediation and reconciliation. Semiotic signs and symbols convey meanings that facilitate understanding and building of consensus. This can be achieved through the use of proverbs, emblems, colours, gift-giving, symbolic gestures among others. Its use in dispute settlement can be more effective than modern legal systems which emphasize more on punishing the guilty.

Dunbar-Hall (1991) asserted that traditional systems use tangible items to signify agreement or covenant. According to him, the use of a covenant logo is an indication that parties are ready to resolve a dispute and embrace peace. He further said that the presence of religious emblems or specific colour schemes at a settlement venue can convey specific peace messages during conflict or peace-building. Speaking about semiotic meanings of rituals in dispute settlement, Dunbar-Hall stated that bringing a dispute before a shrine and a custodian of ancestral relics implies a voluntary decision to participate in a resolution process. Parker (1985) holds that oral traditions such as indigenous proverbs, songs, and storytelling are often used to communicate moral lessons and persuade disputants to embrace peace. According to him, oral traditions go beyond just words, they carry deep cultural meanings and forms of symbolic communication that help individuals and communities to understand the gravity of the situation and the expected behaviour.

Lending his voice to the conversation, Grant (2003), notes that non-verbal cues such as coded messages and musical performances can act as semiotic devices to announce conflict, declare war, or promote peace. He maintains that the specific styles, sounds, rhythms and forms of communication are all part of the system of signs used in human society (p. 186).

Sullivan (2006) pointed out that the roles played by mediators in a dispute settlement can signal commitment to peaceful resolution. An elder's presence at a dispute settlement is a key element in many traditional systems because it signifies authority, impartiality, honesty, and knowledge of customary practices.

### Empirical Review

Nwankwo and Nzeribe (1990) in their study, integrating the traditional and modern conflict management strategies in Nigeria, used the survey method of social investigation to collect data, and argued for the integration of traditional and modern strategies to manage conflicts

in Nigeria by combining the community-based, fast, and non-adversarial traditional methods with the structured, legal, and formal aspects of modern approaches.

They stated that such fusion will help to achieve more durable peace by addressing the root causes of conflict, and building trust which state-led modern strategies alone cannot achieve.

Onyeozili (2012) undertook a study on social control in precolonial Igboland. The study focused on the traditional and pre-colonial systems of social control rather than the colonial era, and examined how traditional mechanisms such as oral laws, councils of elders, and age grades maintained social order before the imposition of colonial rule. The study recommended the enlivening of traditional dispute settlements patterns to ensure peace, law, order, rebuilding of unity and communal values.

Thresa (2014) in a study titled, methods of conflicts resolutions in African traditional societies used survey to gather data on the methods used by Ijebu communities to settle disputes. The study concluded that indigenous dispute settlements patterns are highly effective in promoting reconciliation, forgiveness and unity

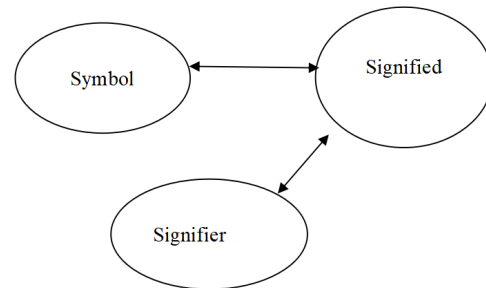
Obodoegbulam and Amadi (2018) in their study titled: 'Traditional dispute resolution mechanism in Ogba and Ikwerre', examined the different mechanisms used for traditional dispute settlements in Ogba and Ikwerre cultures in Rivers State.

The study adopted the ethnographic and historical method of data collection. It concluded that traditional means of dispute resolution which have been eroded owing to western style of legal system should be revived for a more effective peace and harmony in African communities.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study adopted qualitative approaches to both data collection and analysis.

Using ethnographic methods, the researchers were immersed within the Ikwerre and Etche cultures to practically collect both visual and narrative data on the symbols, objects, rituals, locations and patterns used for



traditional dispute settlements.

The data used for analysis as gathered from the field were validated using the member-checking method as leaders of traditional institutions and custodians of culture in the two traditions were visited for corroborations.

Using Semiotic Analysis, the study adopted the Symbol, Signified and Signifier (S-S-S) template to deduct usage meanings and significations from the symbols, items, objects, location, patterns among others used for traditional dispute settlements.

Knowing that the world is a composite of signs that have literal and non-literal meanings, the researchers took copious notes of the symbols, objects, items, locations, language among other praxis used for dispute settlements in Ikwerre and Etche cultures, and deducted the meanings that they portend within the cultures' conflict management system.

**Table 1:** Kola Nut

S/No	Culture	Signifier	Analysis
1.	Ikwerre	Reconciliation Peace Building	In both cultures, kola nut signifies reconciliation, peace building, and legitimization of agreement.
2	Etche	Legitimization of Agreement Reconciliation	

**Table 2:** Kola Nut

S/No	Culture	Signifier	Analysis
1.	Ikwerre	Boundary Demarcation and Adjustment	The two cultures use live trees as symbols for boundary adjustments and demarcation.
2.	Etche	Boundary Demarcation and Adjustment	

**Table 3:** Shrine

S/No	Culture	Signifier	Analysis
1.	Ikwerre	Scared sites where truth and justice prevails	In Ikwerre and Etche cultures, shrines symbolize sacred sites and abode for deities where truth and justice prevail.
2.	Etche	Abode for deities /place Place of Dispute Resolution	

**Table 4:** Libation

S/No	Culture	Signifier	Analysis
1.	Ikwerre	Covenant Ancestral support and witnessing	Both cultures see libation as covenants, a ritual of ancestral support and communication with the gods.
2.	Etche	Covenant Ritual of Communication and Support	

**Table 5:** Palm Frond

S/No	Culture	Signifier	Analysis
1.	Ikwerre	Report Misunderstanding Removal of Palm fronds means return of peace	In the two traditions, palm fronds signify summons and report of misunderstanding. To remove palm fronds from disputed land means that a resolution has been achieved.
2.	Etche	Report Misunderstanding Removal of palm fronds means return of peace	

**Table 6:** Oath

S/No	Culture	Signifier	Analysis
1.	Ikwerre	Establish Truth Ensure Compliance Invoke Spiritual Authority	Clay pot communion signifies reconciliation, agreement and trust building.
2.	Etche	Ensure Compliance Invoke Spiritual Authority Establish Truth	

**Table 7:** Ancestral Staff Oath

S/No	Culture	Signifier	Analysis
1.	Ikwerre	Symbol of Authority Ancestral Support	The ancestral staff signifies authority, ancestral presence and seal of the gods in dispute resolution settlements.
2.	Etche	Ancestral Seal Symbol of Authority	

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Data Presentation

The results from the study showed that the items, objects, locations and patterns such as kola nuts, shrines, oaths, libation, clay pot communion, palm fronds, live trees among others which are used for dispute resolution in Ikwerre and Etche traditions enjoy semiotic proximities in the sense that they serve almost the same purposes and portray similar meanings in the two cultures.

According to the results, in Ikwerre and Etche cultures, presentation and sharing of kola nuts symbolise reconciliation, peace building and legitimisation of agreements. Planting of live trees on disputed lands is used to show demarcation and boundary marking while shrines symbolise sacred sites and abode for deities where truth and justice prevail.

The study further revealed that libation is a symbol of covenants, a ritual of ancestral support and communication with the gods while palm fronds signify summons and means of reporting misunderstanding. Oath taking is a symbol of understanding, and a sign that truce has been reached. This corroborates the position of Ngale (2024) that traditional methods of dispute settlements promote peace, harmony and communal value. Clay pot communion symbolises reconciliation,

agreement and trust building while ancestral staff signifies authority, ancestral presence and seal of the gods in dispute settlements. This is in line with the position of Obodoegbilam and Amadi (2018) that traditional dispute resolution mechanism are effective in peace building and reconciliation.

The results generated from the study did not show any radical difference in the usage and significations of the cultural symbolographies in traditional dispute settlement in both cultures, this resonates the assertion of Obodoegbulam and Amadi (2018) that the semiotic proximities in the symbols, rituals, gestures, locations and artefacts that are used for traditional dispute settlement in Ikwerre and Etche cultures of Rivers are as a result of the ancestral linkage in the origins of the two ethnic nationalities.

### Based on the above, the following findings were made

1. Traditional disputes settlement methods in Ikwerre and Etche Cultures have deep-rooted similarities.
2. Ikwerre and Etche cultures still adopt traditional methods in resolving conflicts.
3. In Ikwerre and Etche cultures traditional dispute settlement systems are strongly respected by community members.

## CONCLUSION

From time immemorial, signs, items, symbols, rituals, locations and other non-verbal and cultural elements have continued to find usage in traditional dispute settlement in African communities. In the Ikwerre and Etche cultures in Rivers State, these cultural symbologies are used to communicate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts.

The study concludes that the significations or meanings ascribed to items, symbols, locations among others that are used for dispute settlement in Ikwerre and Etche cultures have become an integral part of the peace building process in both traditions because their efficacy in aiding understanding, reinforcing cultural values, and providing frameworks for mediation and reconciliation.

The study further holds that semiotic signs and symbols are used in both cultures to convey meanings that facilitate understanding and consensus, and that its use in dispute settlement has proven to be more effective than modern legal systems which lay more emphasis on punishment instead of building harmony and cordiality.

The study has also shown that both the Ikwerre and Etche cultures shall similarities in semiotic symbols and their signifiers. Therefore, by implication the items, objects, locations and patterns such as kola nuts, shrines, oaths, libation, clay pot communion, palm fronds, live trees among others which are used for dispute resolution in Ikwerre and Etche traditions enjoy semiotic proximities in the sense that they serve almost the same purposes and portray similar meanings in the two cultures.

The study further revealed that libation is a symbol of covenants, a ritual of ancestral support and communication with the gods while palm fronds signify summons and means of reporting misunderstanding. Oath taking is a symbol of understanding, and a sign that truce has been reached. This corroborates the position of Ngale (2024) that traditional methods of dispute settlements promote peace, harmony and communal value.

This tradition provokes the involvement of the gods and ancestors in the dispute settlement process, and compels compliance with the terms of resolution because parties fear negative consequences arising from the wrath of the gods. Based on the conclusion above, the study recommends as follows:

1. Custodians of Ikwerre and Etche culture should still try to follow the adoption of traditional mode of dispute settlement.
2. The two cultures should not only live up traditional settlement tools that have not been adopted by them for peace settlement.
3. The use of traditional methods is to be made firm by conventional methods, such as the registration of the terms of settlement.

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